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**‘ O brother, do not behave like this’**  
**Moral Controversies and ‘empirical’ validations in the Himalayas**

Denis Vidal ( IRD)

*First draft*

Is it possible to imagine that one may feel morally right to kill and decapitate an old man in the middle of the night who is completely defenceless and who had been particularly kind to you when you were a child? According to cultural relativism, this is a distinct possibility if you belong to a culture where such behaviour is effectively acceptable and you have been socialised in it and interiorised its values. But if you strongly believe in the universality of moral values, you will no doubt consider that any one who is not perverse would spontaneously find such behaviour completely abhorrent, whatever his or her culture, his or her education and the sort of legitimacy which may be claimed for such an act. Finally, if you are following some of the recent researches taking place in the anthropology of morality, you will probably judge that both perspectives are not necessarily contradictory; you may consider that much depends, from a methodological point of view, on the level of analysis taken into consideration. One may then consider simultaneously that:

- All human beings share spontaneously, perhaps even genetically, an equal repulsion to killing another human being, especially so if one knows him personally and he is defenceless, as it is often the case in the revenge killings which take place in the sort of Himalayan feuds that I have been studying .
- But in spite of such a spontaneous repulsion whose existence may even have been proved if you agree with the findings of some experiments by developmental psychologists, it is nonetheless the case that in certain cultures such practices have been not only regularly practiced but have also been considered perfectly moral and legitimate, and also accepted as such, in particular by people who practice such feuds.

The relevance of the analytical distinction - eventually also the compatibility – between, on the one hand, innate moral dispositions which may well have an universal character and, on the other hand, other moral characteristics which are much more culture-specific – has been highlighted in the pioneering works of Elliot Turiel in the eighties (Turiel 1983) . But new research has also developed more recently around this same distinction, both in cognitive anthropology and in cognitive psychology.

What I have been surprised to discover is that anthropological works about India have played a relatively central role in contemporary debates of cognitive psychology and anthropology around this same distinction. Richard Schweder, one of the leading specialists in the domain, seems unconvinced that such a distinction put forward by Turiel and others, makes sense in every culture (Schweder and al. 1983) . Most interestingly, he does not seem to consider that it is relevant in India, because the very idea that morality could be considered as context dependant is not supposed to not make sense for Indian people. I have no reason to contest the ethnographic evidence collected by Schweder in Orissa (1983) but I have serious reservations about the possibility of extending its validity for the whole of Indian society. I happen to have worked some years ago about feuds which were taking place in parts of the

Himalaya where Hindu culture is prevalent. And I will argue that one can't find a better illustration of the moral dilemmas which may result of the contradiction between inner moral dispositions and public norms. A clear consciousness of the existence of these two levels of moral preoccupation was completely explicit, both in the discourse and in the behaviour of the local people. My paper will be then based on the ethnographic data that I was fortunate enough to obtain from the very people who participated directly in these feuds, either because they murdered other people or because they were the parents of some of the victims.

Taking then a different perspective that the one defended by Shweder about India, I will attempt, in the first part of this paper to demonstrate the relevance of the analytical distinction made by Turiel, Sperber, Baumard and others between moral dispositions of an universal character and contextualised public norms of morality, for a better understanding of the ethnographic reality of these Himalayan feuds. In the second part of my paper, however, I will then endorse a remark often made in arguing against racism but which is also used by Sperber where he insists rightly on the fact that one may generally find as many differences in moral attitudes within a particular culture as between different ones. But, rather than using this argument for downplaying the epistemological importance of cultural relativism, I will use it to emphasise the paramount importance of individual variations in the anthropology of morality.

The methodological approach that I wish to advocate here has not much to do with the mild form of cultural relativism advocated by Shweder and others; but neither does it identify with attempts to downplay the epistemological importance of cultural or individual variations in the moral domain and to rather focus on the underlying similarities which may specify moral attitudes as such. Everyone will admit today that one can't adopt an evolutionary approach to the natural world without also examining in minute detail how historical and individual variations occur. Similarly, I believe, one can't expect either to understand how moral regimes take shape or eventually disappear, without paying the same attention into how minute individual variations which occur in any culture may contribute to the study of moral values. But before I come to this point, I will introduce briefly a few ethnographic facts to demonstrate in India like elsewhere, the existence of universal moral feelings which don't seem to differ fundamentally from the ones that one may find elsewhere in the world and which may also be distinguished analytically from the more culturally specific values which characterise the feuds in this Himalayan region.

## II. FEUDS IN THE HIMALAYA

The clans that practiced feuds in this Western part of Himachal Pradesh where I worked in the eighties were called Khund to differentiate them from other local Rajputs. They were organized into large, patrilineal clans (*dhai* or *biradari*), comprising anywhere from a few hundred to several thousand individuals, who acknowledged a common ancestry and were divided into several lines of descent (*al*), sub-divisions (*khandan*), families and homes. Most of my enquiry about feuds consisted of analysing their social and cultural meanings, which can be studied, like any other social facts, from many points of view. One may try to understand their dynamics, and one finds that, in this particular case, the focus was always on the threat that the ghost of the last victim represented for the people of his clan. Tradition demanded that one cut the head of the victim (or that one took, at least a tuft of his hairs) when he was ritually murdered during a feud. As a result, the dead man could not be cremated and he would become a ghost as long as his death was not avenged. Of course, when people took revenge on another clan, there was always an element of retaliation involved. But I

believe that a more fundamental reason for taking revenge was in order to placate their own dead clan-member. In fact, the collective prosperity of a clan was at stake in the taking of revenge. This was because in most cases, local mediums – spiking on behalf of local goddesses - attributed the misfortunes of life to the ghosts of those who had not been avenged.

Moreover, when one considers the entire complex of feuding traditions from a symbolic and religious point of view, and when one studies the rituals associated with them, one notices that revenge is linked in many aspects to a sacrificial scheme. But considered from a more sociological point of view, feuds also had many social functions; for example they helped to reinforce the links between individuals, and they gave a very strong sense of collective identity to the clans. They also resulted in a well-defined hierarchy amongst the clans that practiced feuding, and those who were considered their dependants. Finally, another important result of these traditions in the past, that I mention only en passant, was that people in the valleys where feuding was commonly practiced had a very strong sense of autonomy vis-à-vis royal authority and State administration.

If one combines then these various perspectives on these traditions, I believe that one may achieve quite a fair interpretation of these feuds from a sociological point of view, and may also provide some sort of insight both into their meaning and social consequences (Vidal 1989, 1994, 2004). In order however to study more specifically their moral dimension, there is no better method than to dig a bit deeper into the specific details of one particular feud. So this is what I wish to do.

### III. STATES OF MIND

#### 1. FEARLESS and TRUTHFUL

Listening to the way some of the local Rajputs who participated in these feuds described their state of mind when they were going to take revenge from other clans, one could easily believe one was confronted with real Romans:

*When we went, we did not care for our life. We wanted only to kill. We had to kill one or two of them; and even if we had to die, what mattered was to fulfil our duty by killing them.*

Whether they had to kill someone or be confronted with the possibility of being killed, it was obviously their moral fortitude, constantly strengthened by their practice of feuds, which was supposed to distinguish them from the rest of the local inhabitants and justify their hegemony at the top of the local social hierarchy. The paradox is that the spirit of cooperation, supposed to prevail during a feud amongst the members of each of these warrior clans, was strangely extended to the attitude they were supposed to display also toward their victims. It was considered, for example, as a ritual obligation to announce clearly to them their fate before killing them; and it was apparently expected the victims would know how to take this news with dignified stoicism:

*Among our dependants (ghara) the lowest ones are the Khanara. You can't eat or marry them. When we (the Khunds) were going to fight together, if we surrounded a man with our bow and our arrows and – if we tried to know his feelings - by threatening to kill him, we normally expected that he would open his shirt and say: 'you may kill me with an arrow in the chest, but my people will take revenge';*

*but if he was running away by fear, then we caught him and the leather of the string of the bow was put in his mouth. He was then forbidden to come in front of the Khund for fighting, and – no one in his biradari could take any part of the fight between the Khunds. Then he was called a Khanara; and nobody had – any relationship, anymore, with him.*

One may notice *en passant* that such an ideology, which asks for the theoretical consent of the victims, is not limited only to the feuds. It is equally at the core of the Hindu doctrine of sacrifice. In the same region of the Himalayas, for example, one still can't make an animal sacrifice unless the animal shakes slightly when some water is thrown on it just before its killing. Such reaction is often interpreted by people as the 'proof' that it is effectively acquiescing to his fate.

The Khund who were participating to feuds did not only boast about their courage and stoicism, but also their truthfulness

*"When I was taken (afterwards) to Jubbal, then King Bhagat Chandra told: he looks just like a child; he could not kill any one. He can't be the murderer. Many people then told me not to say anything; but I replied: no; I will never tell a lie; this is not the tradition of my khandan (household). Someone told me that I will be hanged. Never mind; I will accept it. Because I ever have to bear the sin (pap) of having beheaded him; and I don't want to commit a second sin.*

But if I felt always ready to listen to ancient murderers like the one that I have just quoted, it is also because they did not only boast about their fortitude and the one of the other members of these warrior clans. Paradoxically, they did not hesitate either to describe in grim details but also with a moving honesty, the horror and the moral distress equally shared, it would seem, by all those who participated to these feuds.

## HUMANS AFTER ALL

### Nolens, volens

While listening to the participants in these feuds, It appeared clearly, for example, that most of this people may well have deeply interiorised the fighting ethos of their warrior clans; but this did not mean they necessarily put themselves forward spontaneously or enthusiastically when they were selected by the members of the council of their clans to participate in the feuds:

*D. Jaildar told us during the meeting of N: R. uncle, you will have to go. K told to J.: "J.R. you will have to go"; R. told to M.R.: "you will have to go". K. said that R. from the D. khandan will have also to go. It is how they selected the killers.*

As it was also often stressed to me, once someone had been chosen to participate in a feud, his inner moral feelings were largely irrelevant: he was given very little latitude to retract himself and to shy away from his duty.

*I would have never slain him; but only God knows. Who had to be slain was to be slain. It was due to enmity. I replied (to my companions): "Ô God, you will see that I will not slay him, whatever may happen". But they compelled me and told me: "ô son, they were also brave people who slew unborn children. Ô stupid; you*

*say only that because -they used to warm you up by making some fire for you. Will you not slay him!" At last, I slew him. I will not tell a lie. When I have committed a murder, then why should I tell a lie now? Why would I implicate others? ...Then, we came back from there, and we lived in a cave that we used for a while as a base. And all of them wanted to convince me to slay him. I requested them not to ask me to do this evil's work because he was like a father for me. But they insisted so much. ....You must do it, otherwise you will have to promise that you leave N. hamlet and P. hamlet; and you will never have anymore any relation with the Sanaï biradari. And we will be nothing to you". They washed my brain like this for three days. And finally, I slew this man.*

The detailed accounts of killers were in contrast to the rather heroic manner in which feuds were presented otherwise when described in the abstract. Murdering someone was not exactly a pleasant task, especially, if you liked the person that you had to murder and he was defenceless. And the victims did not necessarily react in a more stoic manner than the young men who had the ominous task of decapitating them with an axe. Most would try to avoid their fate, either by arguing or by attempting to fight back with their attackers.

*- We killed a man. We told him to wake up: "Get up; we have come – for the revenge. We must take it at any cost then he said: "Ô brother, I did nothing"...*

*- Yes, there was a fight when we told him that we were going to behead him. We told him: "yes brother, we are Pajaik and you are a Sanai. We have to take the revenge (badl)". Get ready. He tried to throw my father and I into the river. He was strong and brave, just like a lion. I pulled him back and I struck him with my axe with folded hands. But it was not enough. He got up and he beat my father with the mesh. Then my father took the axe from my hands and separated his head from his body.*

But even once they had managed to accomplish their task, the murderers were far from being safe, worrying even more, it would seem, about the ghost of the man just killed than about the other members of the clan of their enemies:

*I did not see any ghost (bhut). When we came back, all my companions used to walk in front, and I was coming last, because of their fear of ghosts. They were saying: "look, they have come, they will slay us, they will kill us". I asked them what they were talking about, because I could not see anything, just bushes with sharp branches. But they were so frightened; they were becoming mad.*

## **2. No exception with India**

Once one accepts to listen to the people involved in these Himalayan feuds – especially those who played a role in killing their enemies, there is really little reason not to accept the thesis put forward by Turiel and other cognitive anthropologists, according to which one can distinguish between moral dispositions shared universally and public norms which may, on the opposite, be largely culture specific. As a matter of fact, one did not even have to worry that the existence of universal moral values is implicit and can be only postulated rather than demonstrated. If I took the liberty to introduce many quotes in this paper, it was precisely to show that in this particular case, the fundamental distinction drawn by Turiel is not even purely ‘analytical’. One may simply demonstrate its existence, I believe, by listening

attentively to what people involved in these feuds have to say when they are given the liberty not only of giving the 'official' version of these traditions but also of expressing openly their feelings about them. Furthermore, the contrast that I have been pointing out is not specific only to this feuding tradition, even if one may find in this case, a particular clear contrast between the ideology of these feuds and the inner moral dispositions of the participants. The same contrast is equally apparent when one considers more generally the ideology of Hinduism. A good illustration of it may be found, for example, in the BhagavadGita, one of the most revered text of Hinduism. The whole text is precisely based on the moral distress felt by Arjuna when he realises the extent of the discrepancy between the public norms and moral duty which impose themselves upon him, as being, on the one hand, a warrior king who must lead his army on the battlefield; but also, on the other hand, a moral and sensitive human being, anticipating sadly the extent of the human slaughter which is going to result amongst his former friend and of his kin when the battle will begin.

Looking at the feuding traditions of this region of the Himalayas where Hindu culture prevails, one can't dispute the fact that people belong to a local culture where it was legitimate to kill innocent and defenceless people under certain circumstances. But whatever one may think about these traditions, it does not mean that people would lack the same moral feelings that one may find in all other human beings: even if it does not mean either, as I suggested in the introduction, that one should underplay the epistemological importance of individual and cultural variability in the study of morality, from an anthropological perspective or even from an evolutionary one. I will attempt to show it now, based on the same ethnographic material.

## II. Modern Times

According to Nicolas Baumard one may define morality (*"la morale"*) as a way of dealing with situations where individual interest and collective interest are conflictual (Baumard 2007). So, as long as feuds may be described as above, there is no particular problem for using effectively an analytical definition like this one: whatever moral dilemmas people may experience during the course of these feuds, they could however distinguish normally between their moral feelings, personal will or individual interest; and what could be defined as collective values and collective interest. However, while discussing how such traditions were evolving in recent times, people often insisted on the fact that public values which had been traditionally used to legitimate these feuds, were being questioned more and more. A simple quote may clearly illustrate such a tendency :

*When so many disputes were going on, when you could not harm your enemies, you would take their sheep or their wives. It was how enmity was going on. At that time people were very foolish; we were also foolish; but now, we know better. At that time we did not know much. One finds that, according to the shastras, the murder of a man is equal to the murder of sixty cows. You may kill a man or sixty cows; the sin will be the same and you will have to bear it. But if you think about it as a Khund, by taking the revenge you have accomplished a great job. But if you consider it according to the Dharmashastra", then you have committed a sin.*

The problem, however, is that not everyone however shared the same point of view. Individual decisions taken by the actors involved in the feuds did not rest anymore on moral values whose meaning was shared or even clearly understood by all. Let me show it by discussing briefly the rather odd turn that feuds had recently taken when I did my fieldwork through the initiative of a few individuals. This will help us from an anthropological

perspective to better understand not only the evolution of these feuds as such; but also, perhaps also, on the basis of this example, the sort of logic conditioning the interplay between morality and tradition.

### **A moral mutant**

Nobody should seriously expect that anyone could take in any culture lightly the fact of murdering one's neighbour. But once you had been designated to do it, your options became – as we have just seen – rather limited. Either you accepted the challenge, whatever could be your inner moral feelings about it. And you could even be rewarded by a ceremonial price for it if you managed to murder one of your enemies. Or you did not accept the injunction to participate in the revenge. And whatever the reasons you may invoke for such a refusal, you would seriously risk seeing your social status degraded and being socially boycotted or even condemned to exile for the rest of your life. So, as long as most people imagined effectively not to have any other alternative beyond these two possibilities, it seems most relevant to distinguish between the public norms they were constrained to follow and their inner feelings. But what unexpectedly happened during the feud that I was studying in particular detail was that one man – let us call him Dev Singh - extraordinarily decided not to accept simply the terms of this alternative.

There was any doubt in his particular case that he was the one who had to take the responsibility of taking the revenge of the murder of his brother as part of an on-going feud with another warring clan. He could do it either by killing his murderer with his own hands or - as it was more often done – by simply offering a ceremonial gift to whomever in his clan was willing to do it or designated for doing it. What Dev Singh was certainly not supposed to do but what he actually did, was refuse to take the revenge and more significantly, he made clear to all other members of his clan that he refused to give any ceremonial price to anyone who dared, against his will, to take the revenge in his name. Although I was living in his house and that I came to know him quite well, I never managed to obtain – except in very vague terms - the exact reason for his decision. There is no doubt, however, that he had to pay rather dearly for his decision even if no one actually obliged him to quit the house or leave definitively his hamlet and the territory of his clan.

He was severely boycotted for many years by many people in his clan. But things got the worse when the local goddess - feeling that nobody had listened to her demand for revenge - decided to retaliate by keeping definitely silent. People assumed also later that it was because the ghost of the man who had not been avenged that the whole clan had suffered bad crops for successive years. But in spite of all the social pressure accumulated against him, my host kept his determination not to break his promise and refused any form of revenge on behalf of his brother.

According to the local people, what helped him the most to maintain his determination at this stage was the fact that – in spite of the irritation of the local goddess against him – he had three sons in quick succession during the following years. This was interpreted by most people around as a serious proof that he could not be completely in the wrong and that he had not been completely abandoned by the gods. The fact that he managed to survive relatively successfully the boycott imposed on him, eventually convinced some of them to reconsider their moral judgement about him. But this does not necessarily make easier to qualify his behaviour from a more analytical point of view.



It would not make sense, indeed, to say that a man like him preferred to follow his personal interest rather than the collective one. The personal cost for him was too ominous for that: by not taking personal revenge, he was taking a real social risk, a risk serious enough to incite most people in the past to silence any moral repulsion to kill. But one could not say either that he had clearly chosen to privilege the collective interest over his own. At least, it was certainly not what other members of his clan had felt when he acted as he did. The paradox, however, is that in spite of being unable to predict the consequences of his act, not only did he find himself ultimately rewarded with the birth of three sons in quick succession; but the murderer of his brother was the one who felt he suffered the most of his decision, as I will show it now briefly.

### **A cultural relativist**

By announcing publicly not only that he would not take revenge for his brother, but also that he would refuse to reward anyone doing it in his name, my host was the first one to step out of the local tradition in this way. This was, at least, what people had told me. But a no less innovative step was to be taken by the murderer of this brother when he chose to make an ominous decision, a few years later. He then decided that if nobody was daring to appease the spirit of the man that he had killed, he would have to do it himself. He decided to effectuate a long and difficult pilgrimage to four of the most sacred sanctuaries of India in order to appease the soul of the man that he had murdered. It was, indeed, a most unusual ritual step. By doing so he assumed a ritual role which should have been accomplished in the Hindu tradition by no one but the elder son of the deceased man. This is even one of the main reasons invoked to explain why most Indian people wish so keenly to have a son. One could eventually accept – when there are no other possibilities left – that a brother or a close relative substitute themselves to a son to fulfil such ritual duty; but certainly not, in any case, the very man who murdered the person whose spirit was to be placated.

*«You may have come, but not whole heartily. And your father will never come. Your father refuses to take anything touched by me. I requested him ten times to do so: 'O brother, do not behave like this. We are the same. You did not go there. I have visited the four places of pilgrimage, which are the four corners of India. I have made the Pinda karna' for him (M.S.S.). In the four dams, I treated him as my father and I became his son. I worshipped him like my father. Now if your father says that what happened was unavoidable and that we should forget it; and if he takes food touched by his enemy and if the food that he has touched is given to his enemy, then it will be possible to have a real compromise »*

But if the murderer chose to act as he did, it was clearly not in his case, a fully disinterested gesture or a purely moral impulsion. According to the people, his motivations were more pragmatic: he had never managed to have a son – he had only four girls – after he participated as a young man to the feud. And he attributed it paradoxically – it would seem – the very fact that no attempt had been made to take revenge for the man that he had killed.

*J. is completely changed, as he has no sons; only four girls were born to him. He thinks that as he has committed the murder of an innocent man, God has punished him. But R.R. is a very cruel man, still nowadays.*

By acting in this way our murderer not only innovated from a ritual point of view; but, as he explained it as well, he arrived at the conclusion that one should seriously reconsider local traditions and think anew about their legitimacy. So, ultimately, in this case - like in the case of the brother of his victim - one could not relate the behaviour of this man to a clear conflict between existing public norms and inner moral dispositions; nor to any obvious contradiction between his personal interest and those of his community; even if - soon after he came back from his pilgrimage - he managed incidentally to have his first male descendant (by taking also a younger wife, which may help!).

This man had been then shifting from a rather conservative social posture to a much more innovative one. While I was doing my fieldwork, feuds remained glorified in hundreds of songs, and they still played an important role in the social life in these valleys. But if the cultural fabric upon which they rested seemed now rather shaky, it was largely, I suspect, because of the unexpected behaviour of people like the two that I have briefly described. However, as I will show, they were not the only ones to react unexpectedly to the changing times.

### **A failed revivalist**

I want to mention finally here the initiative of yet another man, also deeply involved in the latter episodes of this feud. He was the medium of the local goddess who decided to remain silent because she was not being listened to. But also like the previous man that I have just described, this one also had some grief of a more personal nature. He considered that it was because of the ghost of my host's brother that he had remained childless. But rather than to attempt to appease in a peacefully way the soul of the victim, he decided to take the revenge into his own hands and to go with his father to kill any man belonging to the clan of the murderer.

*I thought and I said that I will take the revenge for my lineage (khandan); and what may happen will happen! The day was calculated; and when we came back with the head, a great ceremony was organised. Havan was done, halwa was offered, gun firing was fired, drums were beaten, the Devi puja was done and a flag was put on the temple of the Devi.*

It seems that he effectively managed to kill a man of the other clan, cutting his head off and offering it clandestinely to the goddess of his clan.

*Pandit Shiv Ram Jolta was invited, this day. We did the Havan and we told him not to disclose the matter, otherwise he would be killed. When the head is being offered, a wooden char mandal is necessary, and then Devi worship is going on. Then Kali will come (through the trance of the medium, my comment) and she will say that one will not have to face any form of hardship because she is the one who takes the responsibility for it, she, Kali. Havan is then organised with drum beatings (the ritual sacrifice, my comment) (cf note 3.). And it is what we did. Then we kept quiet and silent. We were in hot water; because we knew very well that, as soon as they would know it, the feud would start again and it would never end.*

He succeeded also to oblige the family of the first victim to pay him - against their wish - a ceremonial price for the murder. What he did not manage however was to have a son and he remained childless. More significantly, in spite of what he had done, everyone in these

valleys, refused to acknowledge openly the existence of this last murder. While most people in both clans knew perfectly well what had happened, they preferred to ignore it and to consider simply that an unfortunate accident must have happened to the man who had been murdered.

### **The ‘two period’ theory**

A common methodological mistake in anthropology is what one might call : “the two periods theory” . It consists in assuming too easily that – once upon the time – things were seriously different from what they have become, without serious knowledge (or study) of the past . In the anthropology of India, a huge amount of research dedicated to caste gives a good example of this. For a long time, it was assumed that one could effectively study the social and cultural implications of the caste system, without taking into account modern or foreign influences and Indian history, more generally. It took nearly a generation to show that seductive anthropological theories such as the distinction between holism and individualism, for example (Dumont 1967) may perhaps be built on such a basis; but they were never grounded convincingly either in historical or in empirical terms (see Bayly 2001). One should not believe however that the ‘two period theory’ is the only preserve of social scientists. In the case of the feuds that I have introduced here, local understandings of history was also fundamentally based upon the notion that people’s behaviour in the past was very different of what it had become more recently: if one may then summarise how local feuds had been described to me, it seems that one may fundamentally distinguish between two periods of time, each of them characterised by a different manner of conceiving the articulation between moral feelings and cultural norms in this context.

As long as people spoke about the past , they systematically insisted on the fact that whatever inner moral feeling people may have had, the people who participated in this tradition could hardly refuse to play their role in them, if they did not want to risk losing their social status or to be definitely exiled from their community . a quote of one of the murderer demonstrates clearly well the sort of dilemmas they were supposed to be confronted to. However in modern times, the same informants insisted on the fact that public values used to legitimate these feuds were seriously questioned; not only that but individual people – like the one that I have described –publicly refused to participate in a feud in order not to offend anymore their moral convictions. As a consequence of it, some of the other actors involved in these feuds came also to reconsider their signification. But such a feeling – as I have already shown – was not necessarily shared by everyone around. The main characteristic of the more recent episodes of the feuds I studied seemed to reside in the fact that no consensus existed amongst their protagonists, in order to know how they should behave, either individually or collectively. Drastic decisions, taken by some of the main actors involved in these feuds did not rest anymore - if ever it had been the case - on common values whose meaning was shared if not necessarily approved by everyone around. Significantly also, the behaviour of all the protagonists had become less and less predictable: a goddess was sulking because nobody listened to her when she asked for revenge; a murderer was going on a pilgrimage to expiate his crime; and people were not even sure if a compromise had been reached or not between previously fighting clans and whom one should consider as one’s enemy. The following dialogue between a murderer, an other member of his clan and the nephew of his victim in the clan of his enemies is showing it particularly clearly:

*First Sanai: the ones who favoured the compromise have favoured it but others have not favoured it. Some of the Sanai say : we still want our sacred drum (a*

*nagar) As long as we don't get back our drum, we can't have relations; we can't go to the places of the Pajaik.*

Second Sanai:*and what about the Pajaik ? Do they come to our place.... ?*

A Pajaik:*but I have come to the marriages and I came also to some fairs. What do you make generalities like that. I came To Bagna".*

First Sanai:*You may have come, but not whole heartily. And your father will never come. Your father refuses to take anything touched by me. I requested him ten times to do so : 'O brother, do not behave like this'.*

The question however is to know if one may still find, in spite of this, some underlying logic in the culture in regard of these traditions at the time while I was studying then?

### **III: THE MORAL OF THE HISTORY**

if one compares the behaviour of the three men that I have just described, there is something very striking in their way of dealing with this feuding tradition: on the one hand, it is difficult to find more contradictory choices than the ones they made in such a context: the first one breaks the tradition by deciding not to take revenge; the second one had previously killed a man but afterwards, he radically changed his perspective and condemned his past behaviour; and the third one tried, without much success, to restore the tradition by taking revenge.

But on the other hand, what is even more striking is that the three men who took such contradictory decisions nevertheless shared the same conviction that perhaps the most significant sanction for their acts - and an 'empirical' proof of the rightness of their respective decisions, from their point of view, clearly shared at this point of time by the whole community - was the birth of a son. They saw it all as some sort of endorsement by the gods of the rightfulness of their decision, even if from every other points of view, there were striking contrasts in their respective understandings of the situation:

- my host could then easily convince himself that he had taken the right decision by choosing not to take revenge; he had been blessed, after all, by the birth of three sons.
- The man who had killed the brother of my host convinced himself later on that he had committed a sin even if he had not realised it at the time. The main reason for this, according not only to him but also to other people was the fact that he did not have a son afterward, but only four daughters. The fact of being 'blessed' with a male descendant after he had gone on pilgrimage to appease the soul of his victim, convinced him definitively that one should renounce local feuding traditions altogether.
- Even the man who decided, on the contrary, to renew the tradition of feuding followed a similar reasoning. The main motivation behind his gesture was also linked to the fact that he had no sons, something he attributed to the displeasure of the goddess for not being heeded when she asked her followers to take revenge. But in his case however, the fact that he did not manage to have a son, even after having accomplished the revenge, seemed to demonstrate that it was wrong to renew this bloody tradition.

Evidently, there is no 'empirical' reason but only purely cultural one why one should associate the behaviour of the people during these feuds with the birth of a male descendant.

But such an association was constantly made by my informants ; and if one examined the respective destinies of the main protagonists in this feud from this perspective, it appears clearly that all of them had been converged around the same conclusion: whatever may have been the legitimacy of such feuds in the past, the decision not to take revenge, and to reject the tradition of feuding, seemed to be for the time being, the correct one because it was the one which happened incidentally to result in the birth of a male 'descendant' . On the other hand, any attempt to perpetuate the feuds or to renew the tradition, seemed to lead only to misfortune and to a lack of male descendants.

Such an example shows very concretely, how, in times of political and cultural changes, people may be driven to question the validity of some of their traditions and to assess, in their own way, the 'empirical' consequences of ending them or preserving them. But in order to understand what is going on here, we must also be aware that the 'empirical' criteria which are put to use in these sorts of circumstances often correspond as well to highly specific cultural values (i.e. in this particular case, to the overwhelming importance of producing male offspring).

However, one question remains: must one consider that such an analysis only makes sense for periods where traditional values are changing in such a way that people feel more strongly the need to test their moral legitimacy? I would like to suggest that such an 'experimental' dimension of moral values can rather be found in most cases if one tries to analyse the way people deal concretely with them. But, of course, the importance of such 'experimentations' – individual as well as collective – and the sort of changes to which they lead, also vary according to the ability of a whole community to react to the results of their experiments with their own values, at a given period of time.

So, in this particular case, most people in these valleys clearly rejected the ideology of feuds. But most of them were still deeply implicated in the very intricate and often dramatic process of proving to each other (and to themselves) that their decision to renounce their traditions was effectively the right one.

By focussing on this very minute level of analysis, one may contribute, I believe, to the study of the ethnography and the history of India. I tried to analyse – on the basis of another fieldwork in India – the reasons why a debate about the nature, use and legitimacy of violence became so widespread in Indian society in the twentieth century. For the fact that this debate was taking place all over India, explains – I believe – the success and emblematic role of Gandhi in the years leading up to Independence, not the other way around (Vidal 1997). I also attempted to show with other colleagues of mine ( Gilles Tarabout, in particular) that a deeper understanding of the nature of the moral debate on violence and the factors it involved may allow us to analyse some decisive aspects of the of Indian society and culture with greater clarity. What I attempted to show here is that such research may help us, as well, to a better understanding of the underlying process upon which any evolutionary conception of morality should rest.

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